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ABSTRACT

A study examined how debate coaches determine the validity of a ballot and how coaches can pass those validity judgments on to students. A survey consisting of five questions was attached to judging schedules at the 1998 L.E. Norton Individual Events Tournament held at Bradley University (Illinois) in November 1998. Surveys were distributed to 64 coaches and 18 were collected. Results indicated that most coaches discussed ballots with their students. Results also indicated that coaches determined validity by: (1) looking to a ballot's comments; (2) knowing the judge and the competitive reputation of a school a judge is from; and (3) giving credence to a ballot comes from a former national champion or former competitor. (Contains 2 tables of data and 10 references.) (RS)

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Comments, Names or Ranks: How the Validity of a Ballot is Determined

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Most of us would agree that there are many things that can be learned in forensics. Some are obvious: how to structure a speech, how to research, how to find the climax point of a piece of literature. Some are learned more indirectly: how to dress professionally, how to win and lose graciously, how to manage interpersonal relationships, how to pack for a week in a suitcase the size of a small extemp file. The role that ballots play in this learning process has long been studied. Cross (1976) claims "effective learning requires feedback and evaluation" (p. 53). Bock and Bock in Hanson (1987) state, "No act of communication is complete until it has been evaluated and criticized by others" (p. 1). Much of the learning in forensics comes from interpreting ballots. Wright (1991) asserts that while criticism can and should come from a coach, the importance of a judge's evaluation is also important. Wright states about ballots that "it is intended that these comments be instructional in nature so that the student might learn from them and be able to improve his/her performance" (p. 3). Wolf (1995) agrees, claiming "speech critiques from tournament judges can serve as a tool for students to evaluate their own performance" (p. 5). Students come to rely on ballots as a way to gauge what is and isn't working. Cowles, Holloway, and Keefe (1989) found that "students perceived the ballot as an instrument of learning" (p. 2). Hanson's (1988) study on Students Beliefs About Good and Bad Judges confirms that students are most appreciative of feedback they can learn from. Along with the academic learning that can take place in the forensics realm, is the competitive learning that can take place. Bartanen (1994) states, "Most observers agree that contests include both educational and competitive aims" (p. 248). Bartanen goes on to say that "the role of competition is to

provide an experiential learning framework for students to test and improve their learning skills" (p. 248). Students are not only using ballots to improve knowledge about what skills and techniques are successful and what can be improved on, but are also using them to succeed at being more competitive.

Just as there are many things we hope to learn from ballots, there are many ways that information can be shared and interpreted between coach and student. Wolf (1995) defines several ways that coaches and students may share information. Wolf says that "The relationship of a coach to a student is similar to the employer/employee relationship. One party has the power and expertise in the situation, and he or she wants to show the other party how to be successful" (p. 3). Wolf's research goes on to identify three ways performance appraisal can be approached: the tell and sell method, in which the coach relays his or her interpretations to the student and convinces the student to accept them; the tell and listen method, in which both the coach tells the student his or her interpretations and listens to how the student responds; and the problem solving approach, in which the coach and student equally participate and work together in sharing and adapting to interpretations. "In the experience of forensics, the tell and sell method seems to be used frequently" (Wolf, 1995, p.5). This method of coaching has an impact on how we interpret the information on a ballot. Before helping a student learn from the information on a ballot, we will often first determine the validity of a ballot. Coaches may, on occasion, discredit a ballot based on harshness of comments or lack of familiarity of a hired judge. They may also give credence to ballots that come from a judge who is personally known, or who was a national finalist. The decisions of validity may then be passed on to the students, and effect how they use the ballot. This brings up

several questions for consideration: How do we as coaches determine the validity of a ballot? How do we pass those validity judgements on to students?

To answer those questions, a survey was constructed consisting of five questions. The first two questions identified the position (Director of Forensics, coach, graduate assistant, etc.) and type of program (individual events, debate, or both.) Question three identified how ballot comments are handled, giving the choices of : "discuss ballot comments with students"; "have students read their ballots and come to me if they have questions about comments"; "give students ballots to read and interpret on their own"; and an open space for other options. The remaining two questions asked survey participants to rank order their answers. Question four identified criteria used for establishing the validity of a ballot, with the choices of: "ballot comments"; "rank/rate of ballot"; "legibility of handwriting"; "I know the judge personally"; "I know the competitive reputation of the school a judge is from"; "the judge is a former national finalist"; "the judge is a former competitor"; "the judge is a graduate assistant"; "the judge is a lay (hired) judge"; "the judge is from outside my district"; and an open space for other options. Question five identified how interpretations of validity are handled, with the choices of: "discuss my interpretations with another coach"; "directly relay my interpretations to the student"; "indirectly relay my interpretations to the student"; "do not pass on my interpretations to anyone"; and an open space for other options. The survey was attached to the judging schedules of judges brought by schools to the 1998 L.E. Norton Individual Events Tournament held at Bradley University on November 6-7, 1998.

Surveys were distributed to 64 coaches and 18 were collected. Two surveys were incomplete and discarded. Sixteen surveys were recorded. Four were completed by a director of forensics; one by an assistant director of forensics; two by a director of individual events; three by a coach; and six by graduate assistants. Eleven of the participants were from individual events only programs; five were from individual events and debate programs; and none were from debate only programs. Twelve respondents discuss ballot comments with a student, while four have students read them on their own and come to the coach if they have questions. For the remaining two questions, the average of each category was figured. In determining what criteria is used for establishing ballot validity, the following averages were found: "ballot comments" averaged an answer of 1.687; "rank/rate" averaged 7.25; "legibility of handwriting" averaged 8.6875; "I know the judge personally" averaged 2.5; "I know the competitive reputation of the school a judge is from" averaged 3.875; "the judge is a former national finalist" averaged 4.5625; "the judge is a former competitor" averaged 4.8125; "the judge is a graduate assistant" averaged 6.5625; "the judge is a lay (hired) judge" averaged 7.375; "the judge is from outside my district" averaged 7.625; and there was one respondent who added a response under the open space. (See Table 1) In determining what criteria is used for establishing the validity of a ballot, the following averages were found: "discuss my interpretations with another coach" averaged 2.5; "directly relay my interpretations to the student" averaged 1.6875; "indirectly relay my interpretations to the student" averaged 2.5; "do not pass on my interpretations to anyone" averaged 3.625; and the open space averaging 4.75 with two respondents ranking it third. One gave an explanation for this ranking, and one did not. (See table 2)

Table 1

Criteria Used to Establish Validity

Criteria	Rank 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Average
Ballot comments	11	3		1		1						1.687
Rank/Rate		1	1	1	2	1	1	1	4	4		7.25
Legibility of handwriting					2			3	5	6		8.6875
Know the judge personally	4	7	2		2	1						2.5
Know the competitive reputation of a school	1	3	2	4	4	1	1					3.875
Judge is a former national finalist	1	7	1	3	2			1			1	4.5625
Judge is a former competitor	2	2	5	1	3	2				1		4.8125
Judge is a graduate assistant				1	3	3	5	3	1			6.5625
Judge is a lay (hired) judge			1	2		1	1	6	4	1		7.375
Judge is from outside the district				1		2	6	2	2	3		7.625
Other			1								15	9.5625

Table 2

How Coaches Relay Ballot Validity Interpretations

	Rank					Average
Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	
Discuss interpretations with another coach	1	8	5	2		2.5
Directly relay interpretations to student	10	4		1	1	1.6875
Indirectly relay interpretations to student	4	4	5	2	1	2.5
Do not pass interpretations on to anyone	1		4	10	1	3.625
Other			2		14	4.75

Interpreting the data shows that most coaches discuss ballots with their students. This is what Renz (1991) and Hanson (1987) encourage. Hanson states, "It is helpful to have both contestant and coach respond together to the ballots. This approach affords the coach an opportunity to add the positive commentary that the judge did not write, or did not take the time to write" (p. 9). Few coaches have students read ballots on their own, discussing them with the coach if there are questions. This may not be as beneficial to the student, as Fiske and Taylor (1991) point out, students may have a tendency to not take responsibility for their failure. A when a coach discusses ballots with a student, he or she can monitor this behavior and make the student aware of it.

When determining the validity of ballots, it appears that coaches look first to a ballot's comments. Hanson (1987) states, "the opportunity for potential growth for the contestant may be stronger if the ballot comments are seriously dealt with by the student and coach" (p. 5). Obviously, coaches are recognizing the importance of using the ballot as a learning tool. Coaches are also placing importance on who the judge is. Knowing the judge and the competitive reputation of a school a judge is from are the second and third things that coaches look at to determine the validity of a ballot. Coaches may also give credence to a ballot that comes from a former national champion (ranked fourth) or a former competitor (ranked fifth). Less likely to influence the validity of ballots are: whether the judge is a graduate assistant (ranked sixth); the rank/rate of the ballot (ranked seventh); whether the judge is a lay, or hired, judge (ranked eighth); whether the judge is outside the district (ranked ninth); or if the handwriting on the ballot was legible (ranked tenth). One additional criteria for determining validity that was given was to consider whether or not the judge was able to justify a reason for decision.

Once a coach has determined the validity of a ballot, most choose to directly relay those interpretations to a student. This facilitates the tell and sell approach to performance appraisal (Wolf, 1995). By directly relaying his or her interpretations to a student, a coach may influence the student to interpret all ballots through the same scope. Wolf (1995) suggests that a coach should let a student interpret and evaluate information first, which will result in more equal participation of coach and student in the learning and growth processes. Discussing interpretations with another coach and indirectly relaying interpretations to the student tied as the second choice of coaches, while few coaches would not pass interpretations along to anyone. One respondent noted that once validity is determined, the pros and cons of the ballot are mentally outlined. Whether this was passed on to the student in any way was unclear.

While the criteria used to determine validity and how that validity is relayed have been determined, there are some limitations and areas of future study that should be identified. The size of respondents is extremely small, and the study would be better supported if there had been a larger number of respondents. Another limitation is that the sample is primarily representative of the mid-west. A sample representative of forensics programs across the country would be more applicable to the greater forensics community. The greatest limitation is that the study does not include the views of students in determining validity. Future studies should begin by surveying how students determine the validity of a ballot. Students might also be able to identify if coaches are influencing how they interpret ballot comments, and if the interpretation is different if the student determines validity on their own. Another focus of future studies would be to determine if the criteria for determining validity have a significant impact on how a ballot

is interpreted. It would be helpful to determine if coaches or students are dismissing the comments on a ballot because the judge is hired or a new graduate student. Renz (1991) states, "After discovering the source of particular ballot comments, it can be tempting to discount the comments from an inexperienced, less qualified, or extremist judge" (p. 167). Being able to identify if this is happening could help us determine whether ballots that come from "dysfunctional" (Hanson, 1987, p. 10) judges have any educational merit, and whether the problem lies with the ballot or the interpreter. The opposite question could also be raised: Does giving credence to a ballot from a judge we are familiar with contribute to the cycle of homogenous speeches and interpretation selections? Many complain that forensics style, such as policy versus value persuasion, gets stuck in a rut. Examining these issues of familiarity might help diagnose the root of this problem.

We all agree that there is much to be learned from the activity of forensics. Sellnow (1991) reinforces the importance that forensics must focus on educating in order to keep improving. By identifying the criteria we use to validate a ballot and who and how we share that information with, we can add to the understanding of how that education takes place. Future studies that expand and add to those ideas will expand that understanding even more.

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